

Looking Forward

The New TRLA Mental Health Team

TRLA has created a new practice area, adding to its wide breadth of existing legal services for the poor – the **TRLA Mental Health Legal Outreach Team**. Led by Austin-based Lourdes Flores, this is an exciting new idea driven by TRLA staff that is committed to ensuring that everyone – including clients with mental disabilities – should have equal access to our justice system. The Mental Health team in November was awarded a \$19,000 grant from the Texas Bar Foundation in support of its work.

How does mental health fit the scope of legal aid?

Legal aid – whether it takes the form of helping fight an eviction or a denial of public benefits – is a critical component in addressing how individuals with a mental or cognitive disability find and maintain stability in their lives. These individuals are often victims of violent crime, need help accessing public benefits, and have problems maintaining housing. TRLA stabilizes these clients by filing protective orders against a violent spouse, securing crime victims compensation, appealing denied social security benefits, and fighting wrongful evictions. When individuals with a mental disability are stabilized, they are better able to follow through with counseling, medications, and employment that allow them to live independently in the community – this makes legal aid indispensable.

What is the current state of services for individuals with mental disabilities?

Recent statewide cuts in mental health services has made increasingly important TRLA's mission to provide legal services to individuals with mental disabilities. The ongoing enactment of House Bill 2292, a product of the 2003 Texas legislative session, began a significant transformation of mental health services, slashing funding for local mental health institutions and clinics. Funding cuts to Austin Travis County Mental Health and Mental Retardation clinics, for example, have

restricted care for many individuals.

These substantial funding cuts are especially hard on persons with low income because they now must seek mental health services at hospitals and community clinics, services available at much greater cost. In some areas, there are not even clinics available for these individuals who no longer qualify for mental health services. For this reason, the Mental Health team helps low-income clients with mental disabilities apply for public benefits, giving them a broader range of medical care options.



“Our goal is to ensure that the rights of the mentally ill population are protected. Historically, this population has been overlooked.”

– Lourdes Flores
Mental Health team leader

What TRLA staff is involved in the project?

Project team leader Lourdes Flores has worked as a paralegal in the Austin office for 23 years. She specializes in public benefits law, and works to secure social security disability benefits for her clients. Approximately 85 percent of her clients have a mental illness or cognitive disability.

Other team members include: Kelli Howard (Austin), Marcos Lopez (Edinburg), Marco Martinez (El Paso), Nelson Mock (Austin), Elizabeth Molina (El Paso), Sid Munoz (Austin), Javier Rojas (Eagle Pass), Christina Trejo (Austin), and Michael Urena (Eagle Pass). ★

CELEBRATING 40 YEARS IN AUSTIN

Coming up in 2006, TRLA's Austin office will celebrate the 40th anniversary of legal aid in Central Texas. To commemorate this milestone, TRLA will highlight the impact and importance of legal aid over the years. And to continue serving clients in the years ahead, the Austin staff will soon relocate to a new, permanent home at 4920 North IH-35. Watch for more information on the upcoming festivities!